



Competitive Control and Non-State Governance in Idlib

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Syria's north-western region of Idlib remains the stronghold of the opposition forces, with the most prominent jihadist groups operating there, as well as the most committed opposition forces against Assad's regime. As Aron Lund states, the rebel-held areas are governed by a patchwork of sharia courts, local councils, exile government departments, and direct rule by armed groups. However, instead of forming a unified opposition, those non-state actors are competing against each other for control over Idlib.

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Assad's regime has focused on Idlib as it remains the last rebel holdout. During 2019 and afterwards, fighting took place between the regime and opposition forces in the northwest province of Idlib, while various opposition forces targeted regime posts in the southern and eastern countryside of Idlib. In May 2019, following the escalation of conflict between the Assad regime and the opposition forces, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a coalition of jihadist groups,¹ was joined by its previous rival, National Liberation Front (NLF), in the seizing of Kfar Nabuda in Idlib province. In January 2021, the evacuation of the Turkish observation points in regime-controlled areas in Idlib has also altered the situation. For instance, the regime forces have intensified the fighting near south and east Idlib with the opposition forces answering with striking back.²

Before the Syrian regime and its allies retook much of the Idlib area after the offensive that started in early 2019 until March of 2020 when Russia and Turkey agreed on a ceasefire across the Idlib front, they justified airstrikes against the opposition forces by playing the jihadist card. However, the reality on the ground appears different. The most influential non-state actor that emerged as a pragmatic power in Idlib is the HTS. The latter includes the former Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) that remains the most influential within the coalition. Moreover, the HTS was able to launch a large-scale offensive against other rebel groups in the region in January 2019, where it defeated the formerly HTS affiliated armed group Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki and managed to expel other groups to the Turkish controlled areas in the northern Aleppo governorate.³

Other smaller groups also operate in Idlib, and even though they have publicly denounced their relationship with the HTS, reality contradicts that. For instance, publicly, Hurras al-Din (HAD), a pro-al-Qaeda HTS offshoot, embraces a global jihad against the infidels and attacks the HTS. However, evidence shows that in practice, the HAD operates under the umbrella of the HTS and cooperates with it. Given that it tends to possess limited territories and light weaponry, the HAD cannot act as a completely independent actor in the area. It is also estimated that its numbers often hover around 700, which does not pose a real threat to HTS's dominance.⁴

The National Liberation Front (NLF), backed by Turkey, also operates in the area. The NLF is comprised of several groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Feilq al-Sham. Turkey has stepped up both its own military role and its support for the main rebel alliance, signalling its willingness to invest in Idlib to block any regime advances in the area that may jeopardize its interests. The NLF was generally left out of confrontations that took place in 2019 between the HTS and other rebel groups, as it has previously worked with the HTS in order to beat back governmental forces.⁵

Furthermore, foreign militants are also getting involved in the competition between the non-state actors operating in Idlib. For instance, the Turkistan Islamic Party, a mostly Uighur Chinese militant faction, is also active in Idlib, aiming to obtain experience and broader recognition of their cause. However, despite its initial success in Syria, the divisions within the jihadist front in Idlib have also affected the Syrian-based branch of the party and its alliances, with many fighters lining up with the HAD. Eventually, the latter sided with the HTS in February 2019 and became one of its closest allies.⁶

As it becomes evident, since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the emergence of the governance vacuum gave the opportunity to many of those non-state actors to fill the gap. The theory of competitive control illustrates that in the absence of a central authority able to exercise effective control over the state, armed groups that are better at imitating state functions such as defense, taxation, and providing security can win over the population. The theory also shows that the breakdown of central authorities does not necessarily lead to *homo homini lupus*, but it may lead to the emergence of other authorities in governance, such as non-state armed actors.⁷

The HTS, unlike the other rebel groups, used the imposition of technocratic governance in the form of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) to institutionalize its opposition to the regime. The HTS even though it has severed its ties with global jihadist networks such as Al Qaeda and therefore distanced itself from international Salafi-jihadism, still supports a jihadist ideology within the state boundaries. Moreover, it now seeks to enter the arena of political engagement for Syria's future. In addition, as the

most powerful non-state actor, it demanded the submission of all the groups that were also operating in the area and had been defeated militarily earlier. However, the establishment of a technocratic government consists of both HTS supporters and independent technocrats without entirely excluding the implementation of religious policies. By following such policy, the HTS controls the religious discourse without trying to impose it on its government. Despite the public commitment to jihad, its leading figures have followed pragmatism instead of fundamentalism to consolidate their power in the region.⁸

However, in certain areas in 2017 and in 2018, in open defiance of the HTS, the towns of Saraqeb, Maarat Al-Numan, and Atareb held elections for local councils. The residents in those towns also held many demonstrations against the HTS, which chose to avoid any confrontation with locals.⁹ The most prominent demonstration against HTS rule and policies took place at Karf Takharim, where the HTS tried to invade the city when its citizens refused to pay taxes for basic products such as oil. Additionally, many Syrians lost their faith in the effectiveness of the HTS as they came to realize that the latter was unable to prevent the continued encroachment on Idlib by regime forces by the end of 2019. In addition to that, on the eve of 2020, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) had to be reshuffled for the third time since it was established in Idlib. The SSG's limited capacity for providing public services to the population has also undermined its legitimacy. Moreover, the pandemic came as a new challenge to HTS governance in the area. Even though the HTS supported lockdown measures imposed by the SSG, many refused to obey and continued to pray, making it impossible to maintain social distancing.¹⁰

To sum up, HTS dominance in Idlib makes it inevitable that it needs to be taken into account in the initiatives for conflict resolution, while smaller non-state actors lack such autonomy to deal directly with them. However, it became evident that even the HTS, which appears to be the most successful in exercising authority in the area, is forced to engage in pragmatic relationships with the other actors operating in the area as its cooperation with the NLF showed. Furthermore, the stalemate between HTS dominance and the inability of the smaller groups to go on the offensive against it favoured the Syrian regime in penetrating the area. It remains to be seen whether the numerous non-state actors operating in Idlib will be successful in preventing further advance of the regime, while winning over the population.¹¹

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